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AUTHOR Biggers, Thompson
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the relationship of trait emotion to Communication Apprehension (CA). It was hypothesized that (1) persons with high CA scores will have lower trait pleasure, arousal, dominance, and arousal seeking tendencies; and (2) a regression equation could be produced in which communication apprehension scores may be explained in terms of trait emotion scores. Subjects, 197 post-secondary students, completed measures for trait emotions and communication apprehension. The second hypothesis was supported, and the first hypothesis was partially supported. Results of this study strengthen the idea that persons with high levels of CA also have different levels of trait emotion. Such persons seem to be distinguished by lower levels of trait arousal, dominance, and arousal seeking tendencies. These differences may help in accounting for the varying pattern of emotional response these persons seem to report when confronted with potential oral communication situations. (Tables of data are included). (NKA)

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TRAIT EMOTION AND COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

Thompson Biggers, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
School of Communication
University of Miami
Coral Gables, Florida 33124

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of an investigation into the relationship of trait emotion to Communication Apprehension. It suggests that persons with high levels of communication apprehension have trait emotions that are different from low communication apprehensives. It was also demonstrated that a portion of the communication apprehension reaction can be accounted for with trait emotions.

TRAIT EMOTION AND COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

An individuals trait emotions may be an important predictor of his/her level of Communication Apprehension (CA). Biggers and Masterson (1984) have demonstrated that emotion theory may be useful in understanding CA. They found that persons with high commmunication apprehension not only experienced more anxiety when presented a potential oral communication situation but also reported differing patterns of emotional reaction to those situations than did low CAs. Beebe and Biggers (1986) have demonstrated that the personality variables called trait emotion relate systematically to state emotions elicited by stimuli. They found that persons with high levels of trait pleasure and arousal had different responses to an anxiety producing television program than did those with low levels of these trait emotions. The anxiety and unique pattern of state emotions felt by a communication apprehensive may suggest that they also have a unique pattern of trait emotions. High CA's may have levels of trait emotion that are different from low CA's.

Emotion theory as originally proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) suggests that all emotional reactions to stimuli (state emotions) can be parsimonously described with three orthogonal dimensions; pleasure-displeasure, arousal-nonarousal and dominance-submissiveness. Further they suggested that persons have characteristic levels of emotion (trait emotion) that are associated with personality and composed of trait pleasure, trait arousal, trait dominance and arousal seeking tendency.

Mehrabian and O'Reilly (1980) have demonstrated that many personality variables can be described with the three factors of trait emotion. They contend that a unified theory of personality that relates various personality measures to each other systematically can be constructed using the three factor approach. The placement of CA within this theoretical frame would allow for greater understanding of its relationship to other personality variables as well as building a bridge between this communication construct and the personality literature.

Further, identifying a unique set of personality descriptors that relate systematically to CA would aid our understanding of these people. Enabling us to identify CAs with testing instruments that are less obvious and not as easily fooled would also be an advantage. Finally, increasing our understanding of the CA personality may improve our ability to create instructional programs that will help these persons deal with their fears.

Biggers and Masterson (1984) were attempting to determine if CA had any claim to trait status. They employed emotion theory as a means of operationalizing the proposed anxiety reaction of high CA's. They determined that persons with high CA scores consistently report more anxiety when confronted with potential oral communication situations than do persons with low CA scores. This finding seemed to support the claim that CA was a trait. Additionally, they found that persons with high CA scores have different state emotional reactions to potential oral communication situations than do those who have low CA scores. Specifically, high CA's felt significantly less pleasure and dominance than did low CA's.

Beebe and Biggers (1986) attempted to determine if trait emotions were an important component in the state emotional reaction of individuals. They measured levels of trait pleasure, dominance arousal and arousal seeking tendency in a group of undergraduate students and later measured their emotional response to a potentially anxiety producing television program. They found that persons with high trait pleasure found the program more pleasurable than those with low trait pleasure. Those with high trait arousal found the program less arousing than those with low trait arousal. No difference in dominance or arousal seeking scores was observed but they suggest that this may have been a function of the nature of the stimuli.

Given this body of research it seems possible to suggest that the different emotional reactions to potential oral communication situations may be indicative of different trait emotion levels of high and low CAs in these two groups. Viewed another way, we might say that the personality trait of Communication Apprehension may be describable in terms of trait emotions.

Conceptual Definitions

Mehrabian and Russell (1974) suggest that persons have characteristic levels of emotion associated with their personalities. These trait emotions can be characterized as trait pleasure, ranging from extreme pain or unhappiness to extreme happiness or ecstasy, trait arousal, ranging from sleep to frenzied excitement, and trait dominance, ranging from feeling of being in control to being controlled. Additionally, Mehrabian and Russell (1974) suggest that persons have preferred levels of stimulation that can be thought of as arousal

seeking tendency. Those with high arousal seeking tendency will prefer higher levels of stimulation than will those who have lower arousal seeking tendencies.

Communication apprehension has most frequently been conceptualized as a trait. The construct is thought of as an enduring personality characteristic that predisposes some individuals to feel greater anxiety than others when confronted with oral communication situations (McCroskey, 1977).

Measurement

Measuring instruments have been developed for each of the trait emotions. The instruments for trait pleasure, arousal, dominance and arousal seeking are each composed of bi-polar adjective pairs with nine points between them. Trait pleasure, arousal and dominance scales have six items each, while the arousal seeking tendencies scale has forty items. CA is measured with the long form PRCA (McCroskey, 1977) which is composed of 25 statements about communication behavior with which the person is asked to indicate degree of agreement or disagreement. Each of the scales has demonstrated acceptable reliability in previous research (alpha above .8) (Biggers and Masterson, 1984; Biggers and Rankis, 1983).

Rationale

Evidence suggests that persons with high CA have different emotional reactions to potential oral communication situations than do persons with low CA (Biggers and Masterson, 1984). Additionally, it has

been demonstrated that different emotional reactions to stimuli are systematically related to different levels of trait emotion (Beebe and Biggers, 1986). If we assume that CA is a personality trait that may be associated with other personality variables, such as trait emotion, then we might suggest that:

H1: High communication apprehension individuals will have different levels of trait emotion than will low communication apprehensive individuals. Specifically, it would be suggested that persons with high communication apprehension will have lower trait pleasure, lower trait arousal, lower trait dominance and less arousal seeking tendency than will those with low communication apprehension.

It would also seem possible that a systematic relationship may exist between communication apprehension and trait emotion levels so that:

H2: A statistically significant regression formula may be produced in which communication apprehension scores are explained in terms of trait emotion scores.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 197 persons volunteered to participate in the study. Participants were students enrolled in two year, three year or four year post-secondary programs or university social science undergraduates. No reward was offered for participation.

Procedure

No cover was used for the study. Subjects were asked to answer all questions as honestly as possible. Each subject completed the long form PRCA and scales for arousal seeking tendency, trait pleasure, trait arousal and trait dominance. Subjects were told of the nature of the study after completion of all scales.

RESULTS

Data Preparation

Alpha was set at .05 for all tests. Data were double entered and frequencies and ranges examined for inconsistencies. Reliability for each scale was estimated by calculating coefficient alpha. Scales for trait pleasure, dominance, communication apprehension and arousal seeking tendency all produced acceptable alpha values (Table 1). The values for trait arousal were not optimal but were deemed minimally acceptable (Nunnally, 1977).

Insert Table 1 about here

Tests of Hypotheses

Hypothesis one suggested that persons with high communication apprehension scores will have lower trait pleasure, trait arousal, trait dominance and arousal seeking tendencies. To test this hypothesis it

was necessary to classify participants as either high or low CA's. This was accomplished by calculating the mean and standard deviation for PRCA scores. Those with scores more than one standard deviation above the mean were classified as high CA's while those with scores more than one standard deviation below the mean were classified as low CA's. In this manner 27 persons were identified as low CA's while 36 were in the high CA Group.

The specific predictions of hypothesis one were tested using t-tests with pooled variance estimates (Table 2). As can be seen in Table 2, high CA's report significantly less trait arousal, trait dominance and arousal seeking tendency than do low CA's. There is no difference in trait pleasure reported. Hypothesis one is partially supported.

Insert Table 2 about here

Hypothesis two suggested that a significant regression equation could be produced in which communication apprehension scores may be explained in terms of trait emotion scores. To test this idea a stepwise multiple regression was conducted in which PRCA scores for all subjects were used as the dependent variable while all trait scores, their interactive possibilities (trait pleasure x trait arousal, trait pleasure x trait dominance, etc.) and their squared terms were used as predictor scores. Parameters were established so that all terms could

enter the equation but to enter a term would have to increase the explanatory power of the model by .5%.

This procedure produced a significant regression equation (F = 18:25; df = 2,194; p = < .05; R2 = .157). Only two variables entered the equation, trait dominance and arousal. Trait dominance is the most important term accounting for 15% of the variance while trait arousal accounts for .7%. Both terms are negatively related to PRCA scores. Hypothesis two is supported.

DISCUSSION

Results of this study support the notion that persons with high levels of CA also have different levels of trait emotion. These persons seem to be distinguished by lower levels of trait arousal, trait dominance and arousal seeking tendencies. These differences may help in accounting for the different pattern of emotional response these people seem to report when confronted with potential oral communication situations (Biggers and Masterson, 1984).

The reaction of an oral communication apprehensive to potential oral communication situations is one of anxiety. Anxiety can be described as an emotional state of low pleasure, high arousal and low dominance. Persons who are high CAs have a pattern of trait emotions which would predispose them to have more anxiety than others when confronted with these situations.

An oral communication situation is one that may be high or low in pleasure but will nearly always be high in stimulation causing higher levels of arousal. The communication apprehensive person has a lower

level of trait arousal to begin with. They are generally less stimulated than their low CA counterparts. Additionally, these high CAs have a lower preferred level of stimulation. They do not enjoy being aroused as much as persons who have less CA. Certainly the oral communication situation with its built in stimulation would trigger more anxiety in these persons.

Treatment of the high CA, who is also lower in preferred stimulation, should then include techniques for dealing with higher levels of stimulation. Training in relaxation or in reframing could be suggested. The trainer should realize that these persons do not like stimulation and should try to help these persons see the oral communication situation as less arousing. This may explain the effectiveness of systematic desensitization in the treatment of communicatin apprehensives.

The regression analysis suggests that the arousal component is not as important as the trait dominance element in the low CA personality. Those with low trait dominance would generally feel less power to control their environment. They would feel as though they have less permission to behave in any situation. The oral communication situation is one that would seem to require a feeling of mastery for a person to be comfortable. The high CA feels less powerful to begin with and the threat of the oral communication situation simply increases these feelings of weakness. As feelings of weakness increase, the anxiety reaction also increases.

The primary change that a CA intervention program needs to make in a person is to increase their feelings of mastery and control in the oral communication situation. The trainer must remember that these

people feel less in control of their environment and as though they have less permission to behave than their low CA counterparts. This finding may explain the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring and skills training in the management of communication apprehension.

While this study attempts to deal with the relationship between trait emotion and trait CA it does not investigate the possible relationship between trait emotion and other forms of CA (context based, audience based, situational and pathological). It would be interesting to know if such relationships existed and their nature.

This study examined the component of trait CA that is accounted for by trait emotion. It is possible that trait emotions may account for part of the anxiety reaction of high CA's beyond that part of PRCA scores that they account for. In other words, the anxiety felt by a high CA person may be partially due to their trait communication apprehension but also due to some independent personality traits.

Conversely, it is important to note here that even though a significant relationship exists between trait emotion and CA, trait emotion only accounts for 15.7% of the PRCA score. This would suggest that CA is largely independent of trait emotion. While it may be helpful to know the relationship, it does not allow us to place CA accurately in any overall personality theory as Mehrabian and O'Reilly (1980) suggested. In their research, various personality measures were accounted for largely (60% and more) by trait emotion. That is not the case here.

Finally, it is interesting to wonder what the effect of CA intervention programs would be on emotional reaction to potential oral communication situations and trait emotion levels. Supposedly, trait

levels of emotion remain stable over time yet the CA intervention program would reduce the anxiety felt. This would seem to suggest that the same person would maintain constant trait emotion levels yet change in state reaction. Or, would the person still have the same emotional reaction and be better equipped to deal with their feelings? Are we modifying affect, cognition, behavior or some combination of these?

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TABLE 1

Reliability Estimates for Trait Pleasure, Arousal, Dominance, Arousal Seeking Tendency and Communication Apprehension

	N	$\bar{X}$	N of Items	S.D.	Alpha
Trait pleasure	197	6.68	6	1.99	.81
Trait arousal	197	6.04	6	1.43	.58
Trait dominance	197	6.22	6	1.86	.72
Arousal Seeking Tendency	197	6.16	40	2.54	.85
Personal Report of Communication Apprehension	197	67.61	24	15.52	.88

TABLE 2

Comparison of Trait Emotions

for High and Low Communication Apprehensives

Trait	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	t	N	df	p
Pleasure						
High CA	6.40	1.63		36		
Low CA	6.93	1.14	1.53	27	60.74	N.S.D.
Arousal						
High CA	5.48	1.01		36		
Low CA	6.17	1.12	2.50	27	52.76	< .02
Dominance						
High CA	5.36	1.28		36		
Low CA	6.74	1.23	4.31	27	57.29	< .001
Arousal Seeking						
High CA	5.82	1.02		36		
Low CA	6.39	.82	2.43	27	60.72	< .02